Telemedicine will link Big Island with Queen’s

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The Queen’s Medical Center, the state’s sole trauma center, will begin treating patients on the Big Island using telemedicine technology.

Queen’s is using a $481,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to buy telemedicine equipment for Waimea’s North Hawaii Community Hospital on the Big Island.

The overall project cost is $630,000, with Queen’s and North Hawaii providing the rest of the money.

The pilot program—expected to begin in about six months and the first of its kind in Hawaii for trauma patients—will link Queen’s to North Hawaii via a handheld camera in the Big Island hospital’s emergency room and a surgical camera in its operating room for minimally invasive procedures.

The technology will give a doctor at Queen’s a view of what the Big Island doctor is seeing through the same medical instrument.

In a trauma case, Queen’s physicians will be able to assess a patient’s injury and determine the treatment needed. In some cases, Queen’s doctors will be able to treat patients without having to transport them from the Big Island, which is facing a critical shortage of specialists.

“Some of these cases will be able to wait until morning when the [Big Island] specialist comes in, and some may not,” said Karen Schultz, Queen’s vice president, patient care of emergency department trauma, surgical services and behavioral health. “That’s where the trauma surgeon comes in.”

The trauma system on the Big Island has been declining while its population has been growing, said Stan Berry, North Hawaii Community Hospital’s CEO.

Many Big Island doctors are leaving the island or refusing to work on-call because of the growing pressures of the job, lower reimbursements that don’t cover actual costs and increased malpractice liability in emergency cases.

The Big Island has a shortage of orthopedic surgeons, plastic surgeons, ophthalmologists and on-call cardiologists.

“We keep losing the doctors that support our trauma system,” Berry said. “There’s too few specialists to cover all of the hospitals all of the time. One way to add manpower back into the equation is to use telemedicine.”

The telemedicine services are intended to deal with life-threatening cases where there isn’t time to get a patient to an Oahu specialist, Berry said.

This past year, Queen’s saw a total of 209 transfers for trauma patients from the Neighbor Islands. Roughly 123 were from the Big Island and 36 from North Hawaii.

Most of Hawaii’s hospitals over the years have received money for telemedicine equipment. But until now, the equipment has been used mostly for teleconferencing, remote physician exams and meetings with patients.

North Hawaii plans to spend another $200,000 to upgrade its surgical room and to train its physicians at the Queen’s trauma center.